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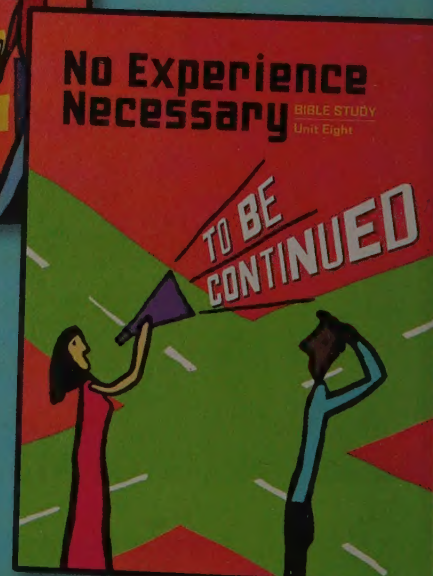
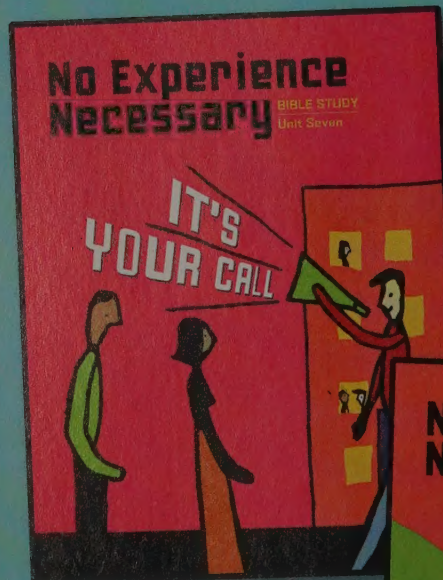
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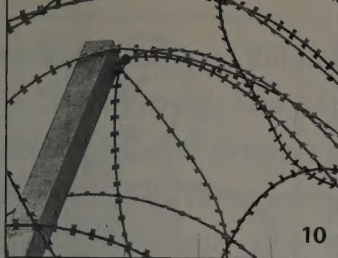
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ACT BOLDLY FOR MISSION

VOLUME 20 NUMBER 06 JULY/AUGUST 2007

In this issue, we continue to explore how we can act boldly to take part in God's mission.

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VOICES

Unlikely Evangelists

By Terri Lackey

I was raised a Southern

Baptist. By the age of nine or so, we kids were expected to “accept Christ as our personal savior” during a protracted altar call while the congregation droned “Just as I Am.” Once we had “given our hearts to Jesus,” we were supposed “win others to Christ.”

No matter that we weren’t comfortable serving as street evangelists. It was our duty to go out and “witness” to everybody, sharing with them the “plan of salvation.” We also were expected to rededicate our lives to Christ after about a year or so—when it was pretty certain we would have “backslidden.” However, instead of sharing the gospel at school the day after I gave my heart to Jesus, I clobbered a kid on the playground. So I felt the need to rededicate my life during the next Wednesday service. This caused some snickering among the grown-ups. I guess I just didn’t get it.

In our Bible study sessions this month, Kelly Fryer suggests that evangelism isn’t that complicated. It takes having an encounter with Jesus (check) and doing something about it (which does not involve beating up people). “It’s that simple.” What’s more, she says, “Jesus has always chosen the most unlikely people to share the Good News.”

No matter how motley, “us” is the church, says Karen Melang in “God’s Grand Experiment.” “One hundred percent of [the church’s] population is made up of sinners, even though holy transformation is silently in process. And there are some real characters in the church,

people with a full complement of weaknesses, quirks, and shortcomings.”

We can’t expect pastors, preachers, and theologians to do all the evangelizing, writes Sally Simmel in “Sharing Faith.” She writes that Martin Luther reminds us that “we all have work in God’s world, we all have ministries. He didn’t say that we would love it all, but that we can see it in a new light.” As in lighting one another’s candles during the Easter Vigil, “Soon the power of the light fills the sanctuary and the world.”

One way to share God’s light is by being present to others. In “What Makes for Peace,” *LWT* editor Kate Elliott reflects on her recent visit to the Holy Land. She writes, “. . . when you really attend to someone, you may hear difficult things: pain, fear, anger, hopelessness. And to be really present to someone who is sharing their feelings, you have to open yourself to feeling them too.”

And that is what evangelism is all about: opening ourselves up to others.

Martha E. Stortz, author of the nine-month study that begins in September, explores how we are blessed by God and how we are a blessing to others. “Blessings are hard to contain. Like the syrup at a boisterous pancake breakfast, they manage to get all over everything: hands and feet, clothes and tablecloths, hair and chairs.” Read her introduction to the Bible study on page 44, and see what’s coming up in the magazine over the next year on page 28. 🌿

Terri Lackey is managing editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Ordinary Evangelism

by Marj Leegard

The group leader began stacking papers. The meeting would soon end. If someone didn't speak up, Maude would have to. It had to be now. Maude gathered her nerve and said, "We are never going to find out the best way to proceed if we don't know where we came from. I think we need a report on what has been tried before that seemed to work and then look at some evangelism methods."

And the group leader replied, "Maude, the people who have the ideas are the ones who get to carry out the ideas. That makes *you* the person to form a committee and report your findings next month. Meeting adjourned!"

And that is how her congregation's evangelism committee was born. *Evangelism* is a big word. What they meant was: How do we get people to come to church? How do we make the church friendly?

For the next two weeks Maude had no time to work on the committee, but she did have some chance encounters that were better than her scribbled notes. Even when her invitations to join the committee were rejected, she gained new insight. "Mercy!" Maude said. "Seems like every person who comes to this church was born, baptized, and confirmed here or married someone who was." She considered taking a field trip to the city to find out how congregations there were reaching out.

But that was not practical. So she talked to young relatives who lived in the city. She had a hard time pinning them down on the exact methods of evange-

lism that got them to church. There did not seem to be any one method. The people and the words were ordinary—neighbors, friends at work in daily conversations, letters from home suggesting that they find a church home.

Maude checked with her friends on the committee. They had the same experiences. They would put the whole council to sleep with their report! Just ordinary people coming in ordinary ways. None of the people she interviewed had been invited by the same type of person. The pastors would have seemed to be the most likely candidates, but that theory didn't hold up. They were right there with their welcomes and new member classes, but they always insisted that others had spoken first. Who? And the question was the answer.

Maude began her report in a low and shaky voice but she gained confidence as heads nodded in agreement. Maude told the group, "*You* are the evangelists. Yes, you are capable. You have been serving all these years. You bring your children. Some of you serve as teachers. You have provided a place of worship. Some of you make it beautiful. Some of you are welcomers—you know how to smile and remember names and begin conversations. We thank you for your service as evangelists, and we are sorry that we so seldom recognize you as the extraordinary servants you are. Jesus called you to be parents, friends, and neighbors. *You* are bearers of the message." 🌿

Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

SHARING FAITH

by Sally Simmel

Many popular magazines and best-sellers bombard us with check lists: Five Tips for Smoother Skin, Ten Steps to Success in Business, Seven Hints for Organizing Your Clutter, Ten Ways to be a Good Person. Sometimes we get sucked into those lists because we want to be better at something; sometimes they are actually helpful as we sort the many dimensions of our lives.

So how do we make a list of Hints for Sharing Our Faith Story? The July session of Kelly Fryer's Bible study, "Like the First Evangelists," is a great jumping-off place.

She begins: "Jesus has always chosen the most unlikely people to share the good news." That's a comforting statement. We meet these "unlikely" types frequently in the Bible, and so we have permission to enjoy our own *unlikeliness*. We the unlikely are in the majority and don't forget it.

I certainly qualify. How about you? And yet God has put us here. For what? Simply to do the work God needs done to improve and sustain the world and, profoundly, to be co-creators. Improbable as it sounds, we unlikely humans are the "who" God has to get the work done in the world.

There are some people who think that God resides in a denomination, a doctrine, or a building. But these things are really means to an end—the end being the world in which we work (not always for pay) to do God's will.

Other people seem to see God everywhere. For them, there is no sacred/secular divide. This unlimited God resides in the nursery, the cubicle, the courtroom, the classroom, the garden, the operating room, in every nook and cranny. Look around. Do you think God might be doing something

right where you are? What? Try to describe it. How would you tell someone about it?

We all have work in God's world

The word *world* is critical here, because it is where we are the church, where we are called to be the gospel. As Fryer points out, a stranger among us might think that Jesus came to build a church. Yet we hear in John 3:16 that God sent Jesus for the sake of the *world*, not the sake of the *church*. So how did our focus get shifted?

Somehow the work of God became seen as the work of the *likely*: the public ministers, monks, preachers, scholars, and theologians. Then, along came Martin Luther and turned that idea on its head. He reminds us all, the likely and the unlikely, that we all have work in God's world, we all have ministries. He didn't say that we

would love it all, but that we can see it in a new light.

We are all called—lay and clergy—to God’s work and we each have our piece of the mission. The

Middle Ages, lay people began drifting away from the practice of their religion because the clergy were preaching judgment and damnation. Searchers were drawn to the

ley what would have happened if he had never been born. What wouldn’t have happened in your world if you hadn’t been there? That’s worth sharing and affirms your own ministry.

*When we work together, share the ministries,
and support and honor one another, we are all more
likely to reach our full potential.*

image that most embodies this for me is the Easter Vigil service at the moment of candle lighting. The paschal candle lights another, which lights another and another, and soon the power of the light fills the sanctuary and the world. The light of the paschal candle is not diminished, but is joined with others to transform the world and the way we can see it. That’s the way it could be if we supported each other by igniting one another to *be* the gospel in the world.

The way we *do* church is ever-changing

We see some of that today, as people of all ages and faith traditions are seeking ways to live their spirituality. Many look for a way of being the people of God that speaks to their own hunger and experience, a way that is more relevant to their desire to make a difference in the world.

This isn’t a new phenomenon. Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler recounts that way back in the early

chapels of the Virgin Mary because they understood that God is also gentle, forgiving, and loving. They weren’t hearing that from the pulpits, so they searched and found it. The unlikely know something about *searching*.

So *you*, unlikely as you think you are, are the best expert when it comes to your own faith, how to live it, and how to share it. You may have already started your own list of hints as you participated in the Bible study and this discussion. Here’s mine.

Hints about sharing faith

☞ First, accept that you are a child of God. That’s not always easy. It means acknowledging that God loves you and that you have accountability for the way you live. In your very living, you share a faith story.

☞ Be attentive. Search your heart. Check out your own life. The angel Clarence in the movie, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” shows George Bai-

☞ Remember that we are the church, though we often meet one another for worship and other activities in a building we call a church. Maybe you can form an informal group to talk together about the connections in their faith and life. It helps to share your story with other people of faith, holding each other accountable as we go into the world. Consider it not a task, but rather a vehicle for nurturing and growth, coming and going, bringing the world into the church and back out again. If it doesn’t work to organize such a group in the church building, try the workplace, your kitchen, or the playground. Those are places where God will also be.

☞ Shift from *attitude to gratitude* at work, at home, in school, at the gym, and around the neighborhood. Live out what you believe in all those places.

☞ Look for inspiration everywhere. Notice how others live their lives and how they minister to you: teaching, motivating, supporting, and honoring your call. Notice the beauty of the people you know and what God is saying through their words and lives. This enriches your own story.

How are you ministering in your world? Don't assume that you have to go out of your way to do ministry. It's what you do day-in and day-out that counts. Your faith story is told in actions more than words.

☞ Be ready for people to notice how you live faithfully in all areas of your life in response to the love of Christ. Be ready for them to ask

about it. Then you can tell your faith story and talk about God. In sharing your own experience, you make it even deeper for yourself.

☞ Don't use "churchy" language to tell your story. And don't feel you have to be theological. Talk in whatever way you are comfortable, and be honest and authentic about your own feelings and experiences. Talk about what God

is doing in your life. Then ask, "What about yours?"

As Kelly says on page 36, "Yep, it's as simple as that." 🌿

Sally Simmel works as presenter, program consultant, and writer in the areas of ministry in daily life, peace and justice, and the environment. She was ELCA director for ministry in daily life from 1988-2004, and is program coordinator at Spirit in the Desert Retreat Center, Carefree, Ariz.



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LET US PRAY

The Gospel in Daily Life

by Debra K. Farrington

“I’m okay with Jesus; it’s Christians I’m not so sure of.”

More than one person has made that statement to me. The allegation always makes me shudder, but I know what they mean. Sometimes the statement comes from someone who hasn’t recognized that she, too, falls short of Jesus’ teachings once in a while. And so, I am reminded that I do not always act on what I profess to believe, and that those who look to me to model the Christian faith may not always see in me the light of Christ. As someone who wants to show others the way of Jesus, I sometimes feel as if I am a miserable failure.

I, like everyone else, am human, and I’m going to mess up some days. There are even days when I’m going to mess up more than once. Thank God (quite literally!) for God’s gracious love and forgiveness that provide me with opportunities to begin all over again.

Each of us is called to be an evangelist, to share the Good News through words and conversation, but also with actions that are consistent with what we say we believe. Recognizing that we will sometimes fail to live out what we say we believe, it is important to think about ways we can walk the path that Jesus set in our daily lives.

One way to pay attention to how our words and actions mesh is to look at the day ahead for opportunities to show others what the way of Jesus looks like. Take a few minutes in the morning, or perhaps even the night before, to consider the upcoming day’s activities.

While most days have a few surprises in them, you can reflect on the events that are planned. Who do you expect to meet during the day? Where will your chores take you and what encounters might you have there? Is there work you hope to accomplish or leisure you expect to enjoy?

As you think about the day ahead look for opportunities to express the Good News through your actions. What kindnesses might you offer? How will you deal with a situation that involves anger? Will there be any opportunities for forgiveness or for speaking out against oppression of others? How will you take care of yourself or someone else in a way that demonstrates God’s concern for our well-being?

None of this needs to be dramatic. Simple actions can convey the Good News as well as big ones. Speaking kindly to the kids or neighbors, recycling instead of tossing cans and bottles in the trash, walking two blocks to run an errand instead of driving, taking a few extra minutes to talk to someone who needs a listening ear, or objecting when someone is treated unfairly are all ways of enacting the Gospel. If you’re like me, chances are you’ll do or say something you wish you hadn’t today, but with a little intentionality and planning, perhaps we can show—as well as tell—what the Christian life is truly about. 🌿

Debra K. Farrington is the author of eight books of Christian spirituality and an experienced retreat leader and speaker. Her Web site is www.debrafarrington.com.

WHAT MAKES FOR PEACE

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

I've worked in publishing for some 20 years now. When I travel or attend an event, I am always looking for an article to write, which means I am always taking notes, busily writing down facts, listening for a good quote. While I'm listening or looking—sometimes even when I'm talking—I'm thinking, "Where's the story here? What will I write? Are there any good photos?" This is what I do.

This means that I'm always at a little distance from what I'm experiencing. I like it that way. It's exhausting to be fully engaged with everything. Since people know that it's my job, taking notes gives

me permission to be an observer, not a participant.

In January, I went on a trip sponsored by ELCA Global Mission, as part of the ELCA's "Peace Not Walls" initiative. We went to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jayyous, and Ramallah in the West Bank. We were on a global accompaniment trip to learn first-hand about the situation in the Holy Land.

Our little group of 12 met church leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), including Bishop Munib Younan. We also met volunteers with the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accom-

paniment program. We talked with some governmental and political leaders, the former grand mufti of Jerusalem (a high-ranking Muslim religious official), a rabbi, and Menonite and Jewish peace activists. We visited Lutheran congregations, schools, and Augusta Victoria, the hospital run by the Lutheran World Federation. That's the short version of our trip.

But this trip was different: I put down my pen and quit taking notes. It might have been the pace of our travel—we were really tired. Or it might have been a prompting of the Holy Spirit. I began to really listen to people. I tried to be fully present

to each person and in each place. This is hard work—much harder than taking notes and photos.

One reason this is hard is that when you really attend to someone, you may hear difficult things: pain, fear, anger, hopelessness. And to be really present to someone who is sharing their feelings, you have to open yourself to feeling them too. St. Paul says if one part of the body hurts, the whole body hurts. That's what happens in the church. That's compassion and the mystery of being the body of Christ, joined one to another by our baptism.

Instead of a full notebook and a suitcase stuffed with brochures and business cards, what I brought back from my trip to the Holy Land were actual experiences and stories. I want to share some of them with you.

SECURITY AND SEPARATION

My experience of the Holy Land was framed by three things—security, separation, and suspicion. Before we left the airport in Frankfurt, Germany, we were already dealing with Israeli security personnel. One member of our group—a pastor, flying out of Berlin—was questioned by Israeli security for three hours before she was allowed on the plane to Tel Aviv. Even her laptop computer was searched, her e-mail opened. Everywhere we traveled, it seemed that we were stopped at

checkpoints, our passports inspected, our drivers questioned. There is compulsory military service in Israel and the checkpoints are staffed by young soldiers, so you find yourself faced with a 20-year-old with an automatic rifle slung over his or her shoulder, both bored and wary.

For us, as U.S. citizens and tourists, the security was unnerving and frustrating. For the Palestinians who live in Israel, security is more than an annoyance. Israel's security measures—the separation barrier and the checkpoint system—make daily living a struggle. The separation barrier is a fence in some places and a concrete wall in others. It is designed to physically separate Palestinian areas of the West Bank from the Israeli settlements built there and from Israel itself. Its purpose is to prevent suicide-bombers and other attacks.

If you are a Palestinian living in Israel, you live under a complicated system that controls where you live, what roads you can drive on, and where you can go. It would take several pages to describe fully, but in short, your movement is greatly restricted. For instance, Palestinians have different license plates on their cars. If you

are caught driving on the wrong highway or road, you can be arrested and jailed. Another example: If you are a Palestinian whose family is not from Jerusalem, you have to apply every year for a permit to live in the city—and that might be denied, even if you have a job there.

Imagine having to wait in a checkpoint line (sometimes for hours) to get to school or to work or to the doctor. In the United States, we take access to roads and the ability to travel for granted. Until I heard an Israeli lawyer at the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid in Jerusalem talk about access to roads as a major contributor to the humanitarian crisis there, I never gave roadways a second thought.

Essentially, these restrictions and the Israeli separation barrier are forcing Palestinian people to live in confined areas. Former



Children study at one of the schools of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land.



“Peace Not Walls” is the ELCA campaign to “stand for justice in the Holy Land.” The 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted this strategy to promote a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to call for a halt to construction of the separation barrier and its removal from Palestinian land. The ELCA is working with other Lutherans and with ecumenical and interfaith partners toward:

- safety and security for all Israelis and Palestinians,
- reduction of poverty and unemployment, and
- a negotiated final status agreement that includes a shared Jerusalem as capital of two independent states and with access and full rights in the city for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

To learn more about

“Peace Not Walls” go to

www.elca.org/peacenotwalls

U.S. President Jimmy Carter has been criticized for using the word *apartheid* (literally, *apart-hood*) to describe the situation of the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, but the system under which they live has a similar effect if not intent: It enforces separation, with severe economic and social ramifications.

Consider the farmer we met in Jayyous. He lives in the village but his orchards are outside of town. The separation barrier runs between his house and his land. We visited him in his home, where he served us tea and anise cookies and coffee spiced with cardamom. We went with him to the checkpoint on the edge of town.

He and his wife have permits to cross at the checkpoint, but his sons were denied permission. When we were there, the soldiers put up a sign saying that the checkpoint would be open for only 15 minutes twice a day. This means that if he is working the land and needs something or feels ill, he has to wait until the appointed time to return home. It also means that if he is late or there is a long line to get through at the checkpoint, he may not be able to get to his orchards that day.

Access to roads has economic significance for him as well. Because of the system, he is greatly restricted as to where he can go to sell his produce—many markets are not open

to him. Now, multiply his situation many times. And then add to that the many other people who cannot get to their jobs, their schools, or their businesses, and you can see that the system has created poverty, frustration, and anger—whether it’s called *apartheid* or not.

EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

I learned another thing from the farmer in Jayyous. The people we met have a high regard for education—higher than most people I know here in the States. The farmer has four grown children and proudly told us where they went to university and what degrees each one held. We wondered: Why would this farmer spend his hard-earned money sending all his children abroad to get university degrees? He said, “Well, your land can be taken away, and your home, and maybe your freedom, if you are put in jail. But no one can take away what’s up here (tapping his head). They can’t take away what you learn and read. You always have your education.”

We visited Lutheran-run schools and talked with students and teachers. The schools serve both Christian and Muslim children and teach tolerance and respect—as well as providing an excellent education. The children we met there were like the children you meet in many places—some shy, some curious, full

of energy, and ready to smile. The older ones can tell you about American music and movies. We asked one boy, about 14, if he thought that the movies accurately portrayed life in America. He thought for a moment and said, "We don't think America is as violent as it looks in your movies."

We also visited a technical school run by the Lutheran World Federation that trains young men



Ola, Saba, and Hania are students at the Lutheran school in Ramallah.

and women in the trades—plumbing, woodworking, telecommunications, and other vocational skills. These programs give young people a chance at employment and hope for the future.

The emphasis on education does not end with the children and young adults. At the International Center of Bethlehem, we had lunch with the Rev. Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor and founder of the center. This Lutheran-based, ecumenically oriented institution serves all Palestinians. At the center there are workshops and classes in every-

thing from conversational French to water color painting to Pilates to health and wellness to cooking to dance. They hold art exhibitions and screen films and provide conference space for meetings. Their mission is "equipping the local community to assume a proactive role in shaping their future. . . . Through

"LET US THEN PURSUE
WHAT MAKES FOR PEACE . . ."

(Romans 14:19)



An Ecumenical Accompanier from Sweden (left) introduces us to the Palestinian farmer in Jayyous.

empowering the local community, developing human resources, cultivating artistic talents, and facilitating intercultural encounters, the ICB actively promotes the building of Palestinian civil society."

HEROISM AND HOPE

Everywhere we went, we met heroes. They wouldn't call themselves that, but we could see it. These are ordinary people who, despite the hardships of living under such limitations, go to work and do ministry that makes a difference in their communities. From the pastors and teachers to the peace activists and UN humanitarian aid staff to the health-care workers at Augusta Victoria Hospital, we saw people working hard, doing their best to make life better for others.

At Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem, we toured the state-of-the-art oncology unit and the pediatric dialysis program. This



The wall snakes through villages and countryside.

LWF-run hospital offers medical services to all Palestinians regardless of ability to pay. We met with Dr. Tawfiq Nasser, the director of the hospital, and the Rev. Mark Brown, the regional representative for the LWF. Nasser told us about some of the difficulties the hospital has encountered, from struggling with the government over tax issues to the challenges presented by the security situation.

For example, Nasser told us that when they schedule an operation, they need to line up a team—a surgeon, nurses, and an anesthesiologist—as well as the patient. If any one of these people is stuck at a checkpoint, surgery has to be delayed or postponed. He said, “The situation is impossible. This is no way to practice medicine.”

Yet, in our time at the hospital, we could see the amazing good work being done there by the dedicated staff. As part of its special 20th anniversary offering this year, Women of the ELCA is supporting Augusta Victoria Hospital. To learn more, go to www.womenoftheelca.org/20years/avh.html.

PRESENCE AND PEACE

As part of my inter-unit work at the churchwide office, I serve on the committee for the ELCA’s “Peace Not Walls” campaign. Sometimes (usually when I’m on my way back from a committee meeting) my colleagues tease me: “Did you solve the Middle East crisis yet? What’s taking you so long?”

Once, when a group of us were discussing the initiative, a colleague

in Communication Services put a jagged piece of concrete on the table. We looked at the rock and we looked at her. She said, “It’s a piece of the Berlin Wall. When will we learn that walls don’t work?”

Do you remember when the Berlin Wall fell? I watched the news stories on TV—people dancing in the street, crying and laughing and celebrating. No, walls don’t work. A wall can’t resolve conflict, and may not even contain it. But a wall becomes a powerful symbol—a symbol of control and security on the one side, and a symbol of oppression and alienation on the other. Over the long term, this leads to division, not peace. By our prayer and advocacy, we can make a difference. 🌿

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.



Students at Evangelical Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah in the West Bank gather at recess.



CALENDAR NOTES

July and August

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley
from sources including Evangelical
Lutheran Worship, Sundays and
Seasons, and Lutheran Book
of Worship, published by
Augsburg Fortress, Publishers
(www.augsburgfortress.org)

JULY

This month falls entirely within the long green season after Pentecost, when the lectionary counts off the Sundays one right after another. Some people call this season “ordinary time,” but the word doesn’t mean plain or average in this liturgical use. It means “counted” time, as in counted with ordinal numbers.

1 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 13

The second reading today is something to keep in mind as we prepare to celebrate Independence Day. Paul tells the Galatians, “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” What exactly does that mean? Read on a little further. Today’s texts are 1 Kings 19:15–16, 19–21; Galatians 5:1, 13–25; Luke 9:51–62.

1 Thomas, apostle

This apostle is called “doubting,” but he was dedicated to the truth. He asked Jesus to explain what he meant (see John 14:3–7), and demanded proof of the Resurrection with his own eyes and hands (John 20:24–28). Jesus never reproved him for his boldness; instead, Jesus always gave him the answer he needed. What do you suppose that means for us? You might ponder that as you read the texts appointed for Thomas’ day: Judges 6:36–40; Ephesians 4:11–16; John 14:1–7.

4 Independence Day

Have you read the Declaration of Independence lately? One (British) writer has

said that it combines great prose, great politics, and great theology. Our sisters and brothers in the Episcopal Church offer these texts for this day: Deuteronomy 10:17–21; Hebrews 11:8–16; Matthew 5:43–48.

8 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 14

Paul tells the Galatians (and us) that we should work for the good of all, and especially for the family of faith. Today’s texts are Isaiah 66:10–14; Galatians 6:[1–6], 7–16; Luke 10:1–11, 16–20.

11 Benedict, abbot of Monte Cassino

The *Rule* that Benedict designed for his monks sets out a balanced way of life for people living in stable community, with regular times for prayer, sleep, work, recreation, and study. Benedictine monks and nuns have lived according to the *Rule* ever since he wrote it in about 550. There is a Lutheran Benedictine monastery in Michigan; see www.stagustineshouse.org.

15 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 15

Today we hear the parable of the Good Samaritan. The story is so familiar we almost don’t hear it anymore—so this time, imagine yourself in the crowd listening as Jesus tells the story for the first time. Shocking, isn’t it? Today’s texts are Deuteronomy 30:9–14; Colossians 1:1–14; Luke 10:25–37.

22 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 16

The commemoration of Mary Magdalene falls today, and your congregation

may observe that or keep to the texts appointed for Sunday. The Sunday readings are about God showing up in unexpected places and saying unexpected things—outside Abraham’s tent, within the church, in Martha and Mary’s house. See Genesis 18:1–10a; Colossians 1:15–28; Luke 10:38–42.

22 Mary Magdalene, apostle

Mary Magdalene, apostle to the apostles, was the first one to hear the voice of the Risen Lord, and the first one to be given a mission directly from him: “Go and tell!” And so she ran. Can’t you just hear her sandals slipping and sliding as she scrambles back down the path to carry out her Lord’s command? The texts appointed for the Magdalene’s commemoration are Ruth 1:6–18 or Exodus 2:1–10; Acts 13:26–33a; John 20:1–2, 11–18.

23 Birgitta of Sweden, renewer of the church

This noble widow was a mystic, but she didn’t spend her time lost in visions; she was dedicated to serving the poor. The order of monks and nuns she founded lives on in the Society of St. Birgitta.

25 James, apostle

Jesus called James and his brother John “Boanerges,” Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), clearly an affectionate nickname. James is the only one

of the Twelve whose martyrdom is recorded in Scripture. The texts appointed for James’ commemoration are 1 Kings 19:9–18; Acts 11:27–12:3a; Mark 10:34–45.

28 Johann Sebastian Bach, Heinrich

Schütz, Frederick Handel, musicians

The Lutheran tradition has enriched the world with music, and these three composers are prime examples. Bach has been called “the evangelist” for the ways he proclaimed the gospel through his music. Handel’s great work *Messiah* is a grand musical proclamation of faith. Schütz wrote choral settings of scriptural texts, using the power of music to “paint the text,” that is, to express the meaning of the words. You might thank your congregation’s music director for following in the footsteps of these three by using her or his talent to uplift the faithful.

29 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 17

Today’s texts tell us about prayer. Notice how Abraham talks to God, reminding God of divine justice: “Far be it from you to do such a thing!” Pretty bold of him, don’t you think? Today’s texts are Genesis 18:20–32; Colossians 2:6–15, [16–19]; Luke 11:1–13.

29 Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany

It’s good to know that Jesus had not only followers, but also friends.

Good friends aren’t shy with each other—you can tell that both sisters felt they could say anything to Jesus by what each one blurts out when he arrives after Lazarus’ death: If you’d been here, this wouldn’t have happened! See John 11:21 and 32. What might mean for us and our own life of prayer?

AUGUST

The long green season lasts for four more months. What a wonderful opportunity to ponder what it means *for us* to follow Jesus—at length, in detail.

5 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 18

Today’s texts (and the saints we remember this week) help us think about wealth and poverty. The first reading asks the question, and the Epistle and Gospel respond. See Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12–14; 2:18–23; Colossians 3:1–11; Luke 12:13–21.

8 Dominic, founder

This Spanish priest believed that the ostentatious wealth of some clergy was an obstacle to his mission of bringing people back to the apostolic faith, so he formed the itinerant Order of Preachers. These wandering friars lived in poverty, studied theology, and preached tirelessly. Three times he was offered the office of bishop, and three times he turned it down so that he could

keep on in his work. Dominic died on this date in 1221.

10 Lawrence, deacon

The emperor was persecuting Christians in 258, and he demanded that Lawrence, responsible for the church's financial matters and the care of the poor, surrender the treasures of the church. So Lawrence led a crowd of orphans, lepers, the blind, sick, and aged into the palace and said, "Here is the treasure of the church!"

11 Clare, renewer of the church

Inspired by the preaching of Francis of Assisi, this young noblewoman ran away from home to follow a new way of religious life, taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The pope and local bishops kept trying to persuade Clare and her sisters to follow the less severe Benedictine rule, but they were determined to live in apostolic poverty. And so the order of the Poor Clares still do, from the year 1212 until today.

12 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 19

The first sentence of today's second reading is one of those memorable passages that you can turn over and over in your mind. "For faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." How does that resound in the other texts appointed for today? See Gen-

esis 15:1-6; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40.

13 Florence Nightingale, Clara Maas, renewers of society

These two nurses, like all dedicated health-care workers, clearly carry on Christ's healing work. Do you know any nurses? Make a point of thanking them for their sacrifice of talent, training, and hard work. (You might read Jesus' words in Matthew 25:31-46.)

15 Mary, Mother of Our Lord

In 1521, Luther wrote a commentary on Mary's *Magnificat* for a young prince, saying that anyone who sought to rule well should keep it in mind. You might read today's appointed texts for your devotions: Isaiah 61:7-11; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 1:46-55.

19 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 20
Ferocious texts today! Jeremiah gives us God's anger at false prophets who seem to think God cannot hear what they are saying, and the Gospel gives us some equally fiery words from Jesus about people who don't see the signs of the times. That almost sounds like an Advent text, doesn't it? Be alert! See Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56.

20 Bernard, abbot of Clairvaux

This mystical writer was devoted to

the humanity of Christ and to the emotional aspects of faith. Martin Luther called him "the best monk that ever lived." Bernard wrote several hymns that are still sung today. "O Jesus, Joy of Loving Hearts" is in *ELW* at #658, and "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee" is at #754. He died on this date in 1153.

24 Bartholomew, apostle

This apostle is named in the three synoptic Gospels, but the Gospel of John gives him the name Nathanael. Tradition tells us that he was martyred; Michelangelo painted him in the Sistine Chapel near Christ, a strong and healthy man holding his own old empty skin.

26 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 21

The first reading reminds us that doing justice to our neighbor and doing honor to God are related. Jesus' actions in the Gospel show us what the prophet's poetry really means. Ponder today's texts, Isaiah 58:9b-14; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17 with that in mind.

28 Augustine, bishop of Hippo

This brilliant theologian came to faith late in life, after a wild youth, when Bishop Ambrose of Milan explained to him that Christianity was a religion appropriate for a philosopher like himself. Augustine's spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*, tells the story.

Nourish Your Faith

Do you find yourself juggling family, work, friends, health, finances? Do you want to make time to nurture your relationship with God and grow in faith? *Lutheran Woman Today* can help. Whether you are working two jobs or freshly retired, a long-time member or new to the church, our magazine will help you nourish your faith in daily life.

Every issue serves up stories that inform, challenge, comfort, and encourage. Our award-winning Bible study brings together women of all ages to explore God's Word. Regular columns on prayer, health, the church calendar, and useful resources supplement the Bible study and faith-in-action articles.

Women of all ages can nourish their spiritual health. Act boldly—read boldly! Subscribe to *Lutheran Woman Today*.

Blessed to Follow: The Beatitudes as a Compass for Discipleship

Jesus, in his first public appearance in the Gospel of Matthew (5:3-12), climbs a hill and gives his followers a sermon that might have left them perplexed, Martha E. Stortz writes in her 2007–2008 Bible study. Sometimes we are most blessed when we're at our lowest.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Or, as it is written in *The Message*: "You're more blessed when

you're at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God. . . ." That makes some sense. When we humble ourselves, we can pay more attention to God and to others.

Jesus' words give us direction on how we should live as Christians; they are a compass as we continue our journey of discipleship. Just as God blessed all creation in Genesis, so does Jesus bless us and turn us around to be blessings for others.

We hope these Bible study sessions will spark reflection, conversation, action, and prayer. Please join us on the journey as we explore the lessons of blessing and being blessed.

September 2007

BLESS YOUR HEART

Jesus' first big sermon begins with a blessing. What does it mean to be blessed? What does it mean to bless someone else? We learn that blessing others can bless us in return.

BIBLE STUDY

Session 1: Count Your Blessings, Hold Fast to the Promise

Theme verses: Matthew 5:3–12

Focus on Health:

Don't Be Duped by Drug Ads

More than 8.5 million Americans take prescription drugs that they learned about through commercials. Experts say some ads are medically misleading—and a hazard to your health.

October 2007

OPEN HANDS

Jesus knew the power of possessions to enthrall. That's why he opens his sermon with "Blessed are the poor in spirit." How do we live without being possessed by our possessions?

BIBLE STUDY

Session 2: Poor in Spirit, Rich in Blessing

Theme verse: Matthew 5:3

Focus on Health:

The Body at War with Itself

More than 1.5 million Americans (90 percent women) live with lupus, an autoimmune disorder. During Lupus Awareness Month, get tips on how people with lupus can live a normal, active life.

November 2007

HOLY COMFORT

Comfort comes, but not always in ways we expect. In the wilderness of mourning, we see God—and live. Is it possible to be blessed by our losses?

BIBLE STUDY

Session 3: Blessing in the Country of Mourning

Theme verse: Matthew 5:4

Focus on Health: Fend Off the Flu

One sneeze from a friend can pass on a stubborn virus that triggers coughing, congestion, body aches, and fever. Protect yourself from severe flu.

BLESSED TO FOLLOW: THE BEATITUDES AS A COMPASS FOR DISCIPLESHIP

STUDY RESOURCES

The only piece essential for the "Blessed to Follow" study is a subscription to *Lutheran Woman Today* magazine; however, the following companion pieces add depth and meaning to the study. See order information for prices.

LEADER GUIDE

The Leader Guide provides the Bible study leader with additional background information not found in *Lutheran Woman Today*

and makes the experience of leading the group easier and more enjoyable. Included in this resource are tips on how to lead the discussion, instructions for activities, ideas on prayers, and more.

COMPANION BIBLE

This handy volume puts the study texts in one convenient place. Printed in an easy-to-read size, it offers biblical texts for every session.

BLESSINGS JOURNAL

This blank booklet offers you space to write your reflections and thoughts as you ponder the "Blessed to Follow" Bible study.

BOOKMARK

The "Blessed to Follow" bookmark is a terrific way to promote the Bible study and makes a great gift for group members. It is sold in packs of 12. Call 1-800-328-4648 to order.

ABOUT THE BIBLE STUDY AUTHOR

Martha E. Stortz is professor of historical theology and ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California, and the author of *A World According to God*. She earned her bachelor of arts from Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, and her master of arts and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. Her long list of lay ministries for the ELCA and the Lutheran Church in America includes serving on the ELCA Task Force on Theological Education (1989–1995). Martha was a monthly contributor to *The Lutheran* magazine's "Our Faith" column. Martha may be available to introduce the Bible study to your group or synodical convention. If you are interested in hosting an event with her, contact Laura Barkenquast by e-mail (laura.barkenquast@elca.org) or phone (800-638-3522, ext. 2737). Locations and dates are based on schedule availability. Her speaking engagement dates and locations are posted at www.lutheranwomantoday.org.

December 2007

MEEK AND MIGHTY

Jesus is the meekness of God made flesh—power held in check. We learn from Jesus how to take the “wimp factor” out of being meek.

BIBLE STUDY

Session 4: Following with Tempered Strength

Theme verse: Matthew 5:5

Focus on Health:

The Secrets of Centenarians

Since 1970, life expectancy in the United States has jumped from 71 to 78 years, and people over 100 are the fastest-growing age group in the nation. Learn the secrets to extending—and enjoying—your own December years.

January/February

TABLE MANNERS

Before his crucifixion, Jesus shares a last supper with his disciples. After his resurrection, he cooks them breakfast. See how eating and drinking together constitute the kingdom—a foretaste of the feast to come.

BIBLE STUDY

**Session 5: Follow Your Heart—
and Find the Heart of God**

Theme verse: Matthew 5:6

**Session 6: Mercy Made Real—
Disciples as Forgiven Forgivers**

Theme verse: Matthew 5:7

Focus on Health:

Check Out These Checkups

A great New Year's resolution is to get regular medical checkups. From Pap smears starting at age 21 to bone-density scans starting at 65, here's a decade-by-decade rundown of the tests you'll need over your lifetime.

March

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Jesus comes to show us God's face. He also comes to restore our vision. Seeing is a gift not to be taken lightly.

BIBLE STUDY

Session 7: Pure in Heart, Rich in Vision

Theme Verse: Matthew 5:8

Focus on Health:

Yes, It Is the Best Medicine

Laughter not only uses fewer muscles than frowning, it can revitalize your health by lowering blood pressure, reducing stress, boosting the immune system, minimizing pain—and even warding off heart disease. Scientists call it “internal jogging.”



CALL 1-800-328-4648 OR ORDER ONLINE AT WWW.AUGSBURGFORTRESS.ORG.

Go to Stores, Lutheran resources, *Lutheran Woman Today* magazine for online order form.

April

PEACE FULL

Peace is Jesus' deepest desire for his disciples. Peace is not a process or a place or a plea, but a Person. Jesus is the Prince of Peace.

BIBLE STUDY

Session 8: Making Peace and Being Peace

Theme verse: Matthew 5:9

Focus on Health: Stress, the Silent Killer

Squabbling kids, a nagging boss, and looming taxes can all cause stress. Stress raises heart rates, fogs memory, and boosts our risk for obesity, diabetes, insomnia, and more. Learn the danger signs—and strategies for coping.

May

GOOD COMPANY

The Beatitudes don't bless us so we look good—they bless us so we do good. When we do good, we're in fine company as we bear the face of Christ to our neighbor and each other.

BIBLE STUDY

Session 9: Blessings in the Midst of Suffering

Theme verses: Matthew 5:10-12

Focus on Health: Overcoming Arthritis

Can I open a jar? Navigate the stairs? Arthritis sufferers—the majority of them women—face these questions daily. May is National Arthritis Month, and a good time to examine ways to battle various types of arthritis.

June/July/August

BIBLE STUDY: COME TO THE WATERS

This three-session Bible study expands on the theme of the 2008 Women of the ELCA Triennial Gathering in Salt Lake City, Utah, "Come to the Waters." The Rev. Karen Bockelman, assistant to the bishop in the Northeastern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA, will guide readers through the rich images and meanings of baptism and how that sacrament shapes our lives and vocations. Come to the Waters is an invitation to "walk wet"—to remember, affirm, and celebrate baptism throughout life. These sessions will look at the waters of baptism through the lenses of Scripture, Lutheran tradition, personal experience, and the call to act boldly in and for justice.

June 2008

Focus on Health: The Price of Perfection

Teens afraid to "look fat" in their summer clothes are beginning to starve themselves about now. Studies show that anorexia carries a 6 percent death rate—and 40 percent of college students say they would sacrifice a year of their lives to remain thin forever.

July/August 2008

Focus on Health: Treat Your Feet

Your feet have 26 bones, 33 joints, 19 muscles, and 107 ligaments. Women, who have four times as many foot problems as men, must exercise extra care.

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LEADER GUIDE 978-6-0002-1942-0 \$6.95


COMPANION BIBLE 978-6-0002-1943-7 \$3.95

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JOURNAL 978-6-0002-1944-4 \$2.95 < New!

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Women of the ELCA 
Celebrating 20 Years

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You can contribute to the Women of the ELCA 20th anniversary any time of the day or night. Visit womenoftheelca.org and click on "Make a Gift" under Quick Links to make a safe and secure donation by credit card. You can also give through your congregational unit or send a contribution directly to us. On the memo line of your check, write "20th Anniversary Gift" and mail to:

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Half the money raised through your 20th anniversary offering will support the work of two projects that were addressed by resolutions at the Sixth Triennial Convention in 2005. The other half will go toward the ongoing work of the Women of the ELCA.

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Improved conservatory and smaller systems make dry life sustainable. Water to rural communities in Central and South America. These systems help women access income-generating activities like fish farming, gives children access to school, and offers farmers healthier crops.

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Augusta Victoria Hospital serves all patients regardless of religious beliefs, nationality, ethnic origin, or ability to pay. Your support can help the hospital keep its doors open and continue health services in surrounding villages.

Both projects are supported through the Lutheran World Federation and the ELCA

For more information on the ministries of Women of the ELCA

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WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE ELCA

2007 Churchwide Assembly Meets in August *by Ruth Hamilton*

This summer 1,071 voting members, plus congregation observers, resource members, advisory members, ecumenical guests, and visitors, will gather at Chicago's Navy Pier for the 10th Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Living in God's Amazing Grace: Thanks Be to God!* The assembly will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the ELCA and its ministries around the world.

Meeting from August 6-11, the assembly agenda includes elections for presiding bishop and secretary. The Rev. Mark S. Hanson, who was elected presiding bishop at the 2001 Churchwide Assembly, has indicated that he is open to a call for a second term. The Rev. Lowell G. Almen, who has served as secretary since the formation of the ELCA in 1987, has announced his retirement effective October 31, 2007.

Legislative highlights include consideration of a social statement on education, "Our Calling in Education." A draft of the social statement as well as a study guide was made available to congregations in spring 2006, and responses from congregations helped shape the

development of the version of the social statement that will be considered by the assembly.

Voting members also will consider a proposal for a new initiative, "Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible." Originally developed in response to a memorial from the North Carolina Synod, the initiative has as its goals articulating and applying a Lutheran approach to Scripture, discussing Lutheran perspectives on the authority of Scripture, strengthening Lutheran identity, combating biblical illiteracy, demonstrating the contributions of the Lutheran perspective to contemporary life and moral deliberation, and encouraging widespread reading of Scripture.

In addition to acting upon memorials received from synods and upon resolutions from the assembly, voting members will approve a 2008-2009 budget for the churchwide organization, hear updates on this church's commitment to ethnic ministry strategies, consider routine constitutional amendments, and receive previously requested reports from the director for justice for women, the blue ribbon committee on mission funding, and the task force for the develop-

ment of a social statement on human sexuality.

Worship with Holy Communion forms the heart of every day of the assembly and the assembly also will celebrate and officially receive the new core worship resource, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. An opportunity to learn more about that resource will be one of the pre-assembly events, *Worship Jubilee 2007: Thanks Be to God!*, held August 3-6, on Navy Pier. Lutheran Men in Mission will be meeting on Navy Pier before the assembly as well, August 3-5. Young adult voting members will gather one day before the assembly and periodically during the week. A youth convocation will meet concurrently with the assembly.

The 2007 Churchwide Assembly promises to be a lively mix of worship, fellowship, and business. Visitors are welcome for the entire assembly or for single days. See www.elca.org/assembly/07 for more details and to read about assembly decisions and events as they happen. 🌿
The Rev. Ruth Hamilton is executive assistant to the secretary in the ELCA Office of the Secretary.



HEALTH WISE

Standing Tall: Beating Back Pain

by Molly M. Ginty

Kelly Staikopolous can't make a move.

Not without back pain, that is. Ever since a sliding door slammed into her last April, shoving her lower back into a door jamb, searing pain has been her unwelcome companion.

"I can't even roll over without flinching," says Staikopolous, a food editor in New York City. "I've tried over-the-counter pain relievers, prescription drugs, and physical therapy. Now my doctor says surgery may be the only way to fix the herniated disk caused by my accident."

Like 80 percent of Americans, Staikopolous suffers from back pain. And like many of us, she's frustrated and flummoxed by how difficult it can be to treat.

The fifth leading reason Americans visit their doctors, back pain is more common among women than men. Why is that? Not only do we bear extra weight during pregnancy, *but* we are more likely to suffer from arthritis, osteoporosis, scoliosis, and stress, which can trigger and worsen back pain.

Modern living only boosts women's susceptibility. The spine may be a wonder of engineering, with 24 vertebrae stacked along its length and 31 pairs of nerves extending from its sides. But nature designed the spine to move freely—and frequently. If we sit for most of the day, this puts extra stress on the lower back. Standing for long hours has the same effect. When we're on our feet, the lower back supports one-third of our weight, the reason back pain usually strikes here. The back is subjected to wear and tear

over our growing life expectancy (now at an all-time high of 80 years for women) and can wear down over time: its muscles strain, ligaments loosen, and the disks that cushion its vertebrae dry up and lose their shock-absorbing effect.

To keep your back healthy, maintain good posture. Sit well-supported, with your knees and hips level, and take breaks to stretch, walk, or lean back. A recent Scottish study showed that the healthiest way to sit is not ramrod-straight, but tilted back at a 135-degree angle, which puts less pressure on the spine. Do core-strengthening exercises to build abdominal and back muscles. When lifting, keep your back erect and use your legs. Sleep on your side on a medium-firm mattress.

If you do develop back pain, note that it's usually caused by minor muscle strain and heals within 12 weeks. Apply ice, then a heating pad, for up to 20 minutes each. Try over-the-counter pain relievers and anti-inflammatory drugs. Bed rest may help, but certain types of physical activity (bicycling, walking, swimming, and other low-impact exercises) can strengthen the muscles that support the spine and thus speed recovery.

See a doctor immediately if your pain is constant or intense. Likewise, see your doctor if you have problems with your bladder or bowel control, or numbness or tingling in your legs. Those may be signs of something more serious than minor muscle strain: A disk may be herniated, with its outer coating torn and its jelly-like center protruding into the spinal

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit www.womenofthelca.org for more information.

canal. It could be sciatica, in which a herniated disk presses on the sciatic nerve, shooting pain down the leg. It could be spinal stenosis, in which arthritis or bone growth narrows the space around the spinal cord; spondylosis (arthritis of the spine); or spondylolisthesis, in which one vertebra slips forward over another.

Serious back problems such as these can be chronic, meaning they last for more than three months. Diagnosed through X-rays, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and nerve and reflex tests, they can be addressed with physical therapy (including ultrasound, muscle-strengthening exercises, or electrical nerve stimulation) and prescription drugs (such as muscle relaxants, steroids, anti-inflammatories, painkillers, and cortisone injections).

Some alternative remedies for back trouble include chiropractic (spinal manipulation) and acupuncture (the insertion of thin needles in pressure points to relieve pain).

Back treatment can entail a flurry of doctor referrals and insurance paperwork, making it, in Staikopolous's words, "as much a pain in the neck as *it is* a pain in the back." One expert may recommend yoga, while another suggests a back brace. "There's no standard treatment," says Dr. Steven Feinberg, an adjunct clinical associate professor of rehabilitation at Stanford University in Stanford, California. "Five different doctors can offer five different remedies."

When it comes to persistent cases, experts also debate the merits of surgery such as disk replacement, microdiscec-

tomy (removal of a disk's herniated portion), spinal fusion (the joining of two vertebrae), or laminectomy (the removal of part of the vertebra).

In November, a landmark *Journal of the American Medical Association* study found that for a herniated disk, having surgery and letting the body heal on its own *both* yield the same result: a 70 percent chance of improvement over the course of two years. "There was a small benefit to surgery, but most patients did just as well with non-operative care," says Dr. Alan Hilibrand, co-author of the study and a spokesperson for the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons.

The challenge of finding the best treatment—like the challenge of back pain itself—*can require a healthy dose of patience.*

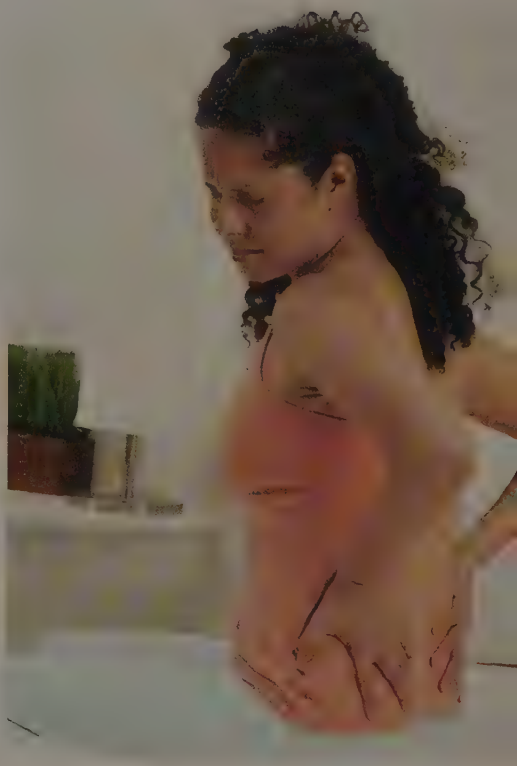
"Studies show being angry or stressed will only make back pain worse," says Feinberg. "That's why it's crucial to keep busy, take a proactive role in your recovery, and remember that laughter is the back's best medicine." 🌸

Molly M. Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women's eNews*.

For more information

American Chronic Pain Association
www.theacpa.org

National Institute of Arthritis and
Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases
"What is Back Pain?"
www.niams.nih.gov/hi/topics/pain/ff_backpain.htm





GOD'S

grand

EXPERIMENT

by Karen Melang

The church is odd and very difficult to describe. You know this if you've ever belonged to one. No matter what you say about it, you are likely to be only partially right.

Is the church a congregation or a denomination? Is the church a building? Is it a worship service? Do all those who are confirmed, contribute, and commune at least once a year make up the church? Is the church all the baptized or all the bishops?

Yes. The church is all these and more.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

The church is where God's people gather to hear God's word. Most of us come to know and love the church through our congregations. We sing praises to God, baptize babies (and grown-ups, too!), eat the meal of Christ's presence, and pray for the world and all its needs. We might even hang around after worship and drink coffee with fellow churchgoers. Congrega-

tions are places where we are welcomed, cared for, and loved.

Our congregations delighted in our performances at Christmas pageants when we were very young. They appreciated our first attempts at playing musical instruments and noticed that we were getting taller. They supported our servant trips and sent us cookies and cards when we went away to college.

Perhaps we were married in our congregations or our children were baptized there. Now, we attend meetings at church and teach Sunday school, cook Lenten soup suppers, and pray in small groups. We are challenged and empowered in our congregations to reach out to those in every sort of need, both physical and spiritual.

When we cannot come to church, our congregation comes to us in the hospital or the care center. And perhaps when we die, our loved ones will commend us to God in the church that was home to us.

For most of us, our congregations are the places where church is lived out, where we see it up close and personal. Unfortunately, the congregation is also the face of the church where people are most likely to be wounded, disappointed, irritated, irked, and generally disgruntled by the church. When people leave the church, it's very often because

of something that happened in the congregation.

VARIETY OF MEANINGS

But the congregation is only one meaning of church. Worship is another. When we think of inviting someone to church, we usually intend to ask them to a worship service.

We also use the word *church* to refer to a building. In our part of the world, *church* often means a facility with a gathering space for worship, a fellowship area, a kitchen, a few meeting rooms, and perhaps some offices. Of course, church buildings can run the gamut from tiny storefronts to huge auditoriums to stately cathedrals.

The smallest church I ever visited was in eastern Cameroon. It was a structure with no walls, just a thatched roof supported by several poles. Still, you'd have recognized it as a church because of what happened there. Two elderly women were baptized the day I visited. We celebrated communion while chickens and goats strolled by. It was a church all right, even without a welcome center or signage offering directions to the offices and the restrooms.

Through my work for Habitat for Humanity, an ecumenical Christian ministry, I visit churches

of various denominations. I go to tell the Habitat story, but I almost always leave with a new perspective and some questions, having had a guest's peek at how other people in other places do church. How is their worship different or the same as the one I'm familiar with? What are they singing? Who and what are they praying for? What events are they publicizing? Are they studying together? How does it feel to be with them?

Congregation, worship, building, denomination—they can all correctly be called church. But as significant as all of these are, we know that in its fullest sense, the church is bigger than any of them.

So what is the church? Who is the church? Here is a simple definition: The church is the assembly of all those who call Jesus *Lord*. “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord,’” St. Paul says, “except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3).

In the Apostles' Creed, we confess that we believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, and the communion of saints. Creating and nurturing the church is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit starts by calling individuals to faith in Christ.

Perhaps you were called to faith when you were an infant, carried to the baptismal waters by

someone who loved you. Maybe your conversion was like St. Paul's, who was knocked over as he rode swiftly down the road away from God. Or perhaps like most of the first disciples, you were just doing your job, minding your own business, when you heard the Spirit calling you to Christ, and then your whole life was different.

THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL

However it happened, God called us as well as millions of others. Century after century, from that upper room in Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, God calls us to faith in Christ. Now we call Jesus *Lord*.

But an individual person can never be the church. The church is always a community of believers. God did not plan for us to be stand-alone Christians. Instead God forms, shapes, and nurtures the communion of saints, as the creeds call it. God gives us to one another by creating one holy catholic and apostolic church, as the Nicene Creed says, out of isolated believers.

God knows we are not very good at communities and relationships. When sin entered the world, people distanced themselves from each other and from God. Our relationships are a big part of us that needs saving and transform-

ing. In the church universal, God is at work restoring genuine, holy human community.

Our church community is holy because God promises to come to us through fellow members who share space and time with us. From Scripture, we know God can show up as the starving one, the stranger, or the prisoner (Matthew 25:35). But God is just as likely to sit next to us in the pew or the choir loft. When we look into very familiar faces, God is there, too.

The church is also made up of believers from other places and other times. We share this holy community with believers who lived long ago and with those who will come after us. We are the church with people around the world, people who live and pray in cultures and societies very different from our own.

Perhaps you have worshipped in a setting where everyone else was speaking a different language. Maybe you joined in praying the Lord's Prayer and confessing the creed in your own language and experienced a miniature Pentecost.

My husband and I once attended a worship service in Rome. During the passing of the peace, many people greeted us. Even though we spoke different languages, it was clear that all of us were merely using different dialects of the uni-

versal language of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. It was delightful to know that we belonged to this community despite being far from home.

All of us in the communion of saints claim Jesus as Lord. It's the only glue that holds us together. Sometimes we forget that this community of the church is not like other communities or networks, where we share interests or concerns, history or biases. We may start to think that the church is an organization for people who are a lot like us, who should share our political views and social agendas.

This is just what the commu-

nity between Jews and Greeks was coming down. "For [Christ Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Ephesians 2:14).

WE ARE THE CHURCH

The church is God's grand experiment. One-hundred percent of its population is made up of sinners, even though holy transformation is silently in process. And there are some real characters in the church, people with a full complement of weaknesses, quirks, and shortcomings.

The communion of saints is a place where the walls that separate people are coming down.

nion of saints is not. The universal church is full of many people who are not at all like me. Some of them are almost certain to rub me the wrong way. But this church is God's, not yours or mine, and it should be as embracing and welcoming as God is. The communion of saints is a place where the walls that separate people are coming down.

In the church's earliest crisis, Jewish Christians were faced with Gentiles, non-Jews, who wanted to be part of the church, too. The letter to the Ephesians addressed this new gospel fact: The wall

In this community, God's merciful loving-kindness is both necessary and ever available. God's faithful forgiveness is exactly what makes possible and creates a holy community out of individuals as contentious and feeble as we are.

God's experiment is still more staggering. The church is only the beginning of what God is up to. In fact, through the church, God is working to make the world and all its people holy and whole. The church is the spongy little yeast, the pinch of salt, the tiny light that God is using to spread grace and

mercy, light and love to all God's beloved creation.

I am going to church council tonight. Our agenda includes hiring a church administrator, building the endowment fund, and forming a member-care committee. Pretty standard stuff. We will probably discuss our benevolence dollars, our tutoring program, and the guys who are accompanying some college students on a Katrina relief trip.

I bet we'll laugh some and tease each other a little. We might disagree about some budget issues or think silently that someone suggested a pretty hare-brained solution to some problem.

At the end of the meeting, we will pray for our congregation. We will pray for the sick, the hurting, and the dying. We will give thanks for babies and healings, for new jobs and new opportunities.

We will be held together by the glue of God's grace. We will depend mightily on the forgiveness of sins. Perhaps we will look at each other with clear vision and see how richly God has blessed us with each other. In the basement of our building that needs an expensive new roof, we are the church. 🌸

Karen Melang is the executive director of Fremont Area Habitat for Humanity, Fremont, Neb. She is a member of the Lutheran Deaconess Conference, class of 1971.

An E-mail Conversation

In late March, the editorial staff received an e-mail in our LWT@elca.org inbox. Reader Barbara Vought had sent a note with an attached message from Mina Piedmont about her experience after their recent Bible study session on "God Is with Us in Our Suffering," by Terry and Faith Fretheim. Barbara and Mina are members of Kure Memorial Women of the ELCA, Kure Beach, North Carolina. This is our e-mail conversation:

*Blessings
leak*

FROM Barbara Vought
TO LWT@elca.org
SUBJECT Response
to Bible Study

Dear Editors,

The first words out of Mina's mouth were, "Tell Barbara thank you for the Bible study last night!" An interesting aside to her story is that I almost didn't do it: It wasn't my turn to have the program. I had already taken my turn and it wasn't fair that I had to do it again—most of our group doesn't even work. And then, everyone came late—I almost went home.

During the study everyone was attuned to what was happening. Everyone was enthused and participating. Everyone was a little teary-eyed at one point or another. We didn't do the songs and we didn't have time to check out all the Bible verses, but we all went away feeling on top of the mountain. I was glad I had not listened to myself saying, "You're too busy." Sometimes we just do what we have to do.

I asked Mina to write her story so others could share in her experience, so others could see the way God works in us at times. Thank you for this lesson. Thank you for your publications. And thank you, God, for being with us always.

FROM Mina Piedmont
TO Barbara Vought
SUBJECT Response
to Bible Study

This is a small story about the presence of God.

At my Women of the ELCA circle meeting in March we held a Bible study, "God Is with Us in Our Suffering," one of a series in "Hope in God in Times of Suffering," which has been appearing in *Lutheran Woman Today*. Our group leader was wonderful, drawing everyone into the discussion, and we were reminded once again that God is always with us.

I awoke early the next morning hearing a frightening snoring sound coming from somewhere. I realized that it was me, and that I was having extreme difficulty breathing. I immediately tried to get out of bed, but my right side wouldn't work. I tried to call out for my daughter to help me, but no sound would come. A stroke—I knew I was having a stroke and that it was important to get help quickly. By some superhuman effort, or divine intervention, I managed to get my left side out of bed, and by holding onto furniture, I dragged myself into the hallway. When I fell against the wall, my daughter heard me. She was frantic—my husband had died from a massive stroke several years earlier.

I could only nod or shake my head in response to her questions.

While I was sitting on the floor unable to speak or move, I remembered the Bible study from the night before, and I knew with absolute certainty that God was with me. I wondered if I would die; but, if I did, I knew it would be okay. God was with me there on the floor and in the ambulance ride to the hospital.

Before my daughter left for the hospital, she called our church and activated the prayer chain for me. When I arrived at the hospital, my symptoms had begun to clear. The diagnosis was a transient ischemic attack (TIA or "mini-stroke"). Although nothing about it felt "mini" to me, I was surrounded with the peace of God's presence and so very thankful for the Bible study from *Lutheran Woman Today*.

FROM LWT@elca.org
TO Barbara Vought
SUBJECT Response
to Bible Study

Thank you so much for sharing this with us. What a blessing! Thank you for leading the study that night, even though you didn't feel like it. Your willingness to step in and do it turned out to be such an important gift! Wow.

continued on page 42



BIBLE STUDY

ACT BOLDLY FOR MISSION SESSION 2

Like the First Evangelists

by Kelly Fryer

FIND LEADER GUIDE
ON PAGE 37.

Jesus has always chosen those who may seem to be the most unlikely people to share the Good News. In this session we'll look at the stories of just a few of them, including the man who had a "legion" of demons... the Samaritan woman... and the Seventy whose names we don't know. What can we learn from these stories about our identity as evangelical people, created by the Holy Spirit and called by Jesus to participate in God's mission to love and bless and save the whole world?

Introduction

It happens in my house, too. On Saturday night, without fail, somebody will ask, "So, what time are we going to church in the morning?"

"Ten," I usually say without a blink.

Or "eight-thirty," depending on how late the question is asked.

Once in while, though, when I'm feeling a little feisty, I'll say, "We're not going to church in the morning."

"What?!?" come the surprised responses. "Why not?!"

"Because we *are* the church, remember. Tomorrow, we're going to meet up with the rest of the church for worship."

Mostly they all just roll their eyes at me and hope they don't have to hear the sermon again, the one where I remind them that the church isn't a building, the church is *people*. They've heard this one a thousand times.

"You're a freak, Mom," my son says.
I just smile.

"You asked," I say.

Imagine this

Imagine if somebody who didn't know any better tried to figure out who Jesus is on the basis of what Jesus' followers do and the things that seem important to us. Imagine if they sat in on a few council meetings, attended a few worship services, joined a couple of committees. Imagine if they took a peek at our budgets.

Pretty quickly they might jump to the conclusion that Jesus came to start a church.

It's not all we do, of course. But we Christians do tend to spend a lot of our time, energy, and money keeping the institution afloat. The way we do church together today is very expensive. And I'm not saying it's wrong. For example, having a building where people can gather makes it possible to do all kinds of stuff together it would be hard to do otherwise (especially for those of us who live in northern climes!).

Buildings give us a place to celebrate and mourn, to worship and learn. Buildings give us a space to share with our neighbors and a place to have potluck suppers.

We could make the same kind of defense for why it's important for us to have program budgets and staff budgets and all the rest. These things aren't necessarily wrong. But they are expensive. And it seems that, in more and more places, it takes more and more effort to keep it all going.

It's no wonder confusion sometimes

sets in and even we find ourselves thinking that “the church” is the most important thing.

But Jesus did not come to start a church.

> GET TO WORK!

Now would be a good time to go back to Luke 4:16–21 and really spend some time listening for God’s voice in that story. Read it out loud and then reflect on it in silence for three or four minutes. Then talk about what it says about why Jesus came.

On center stage

The mission Jesus was on went way beyond starting a church. Jesus came as a part of God’s mission to love and bless and save the whole world. Jesus was there when this mission began, at the very beginning of creation.

The Gospel writer, John, put it this way: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:1–5). And when John said “the Word,” he meant *Jesus*. Keep reading: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Jesus will be there when God’s mission is fulfilled, too. Writing in code so that the Romans would not understand his words that were meant to encourage Christians suffering persecution at their hands, John of Patmos promised that the future belongs to God: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life

with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (Revelation 22:1–4). The “Lamb,” of course, is Jesus.

From beginning to end, Jesus is at the very center of God’s mission to reconcile and justify and make all things new.

> GET TO WORK!

These two passages, from John and then from the Book of Revelation, describe the role Jesus plays in God’s ongoing mission. The language and elaborate imagery they use are very different from the simple stories Luke says Jesus told during his ministry.

Think for a minute about all the different types of literature that appear in the Bible . . . poems, historical reports, letters, songs, parables, and so on. Each one serves a different purpose, kind of like each part of a newspaper (editorials, sports, news, weather, and so on) serves its own purpose.

Why do you think John and the author of Revelation chose the approach they did to talk about “the beginning” and “the end?” Go back and read that passage from John 1:1–5, 14 again. What do you hear God saying to you through these words? Now do the same thing with that passage from Revelation 22:1–4.

In, with, and for the world

Jesus is at the heart of God’s mission in the world, from beginning to end. He did not come to start a church. He came for the sake of the world: “For God so loved *the world*,” John wrote, “that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). The fact is, the horizon of *all*

God's activity is the world. That's where God's eyes are fixed.

Through Jesus, God's love and blessing and salvation come to us because we are, of course, part of the world. Those of us who by faith receive the gift of God's salvation through Christ are called Christians. Together, we are the church. And, *through* us, the Good News of God's loving mission to bring reconciliation is made known through all the world.

> GET TO WORK!

Want to hear what Jesus himself said about who we are and what our job is, as the church? Read John 20:19–23 right now. When Jesus says “as the Father has sent me,” what do you think that means? How did the Father send Jesus? What does this passage tell you about yourself?

To be the church is to be in, with, and for the world.

“In, with, and for the world,” huh? Chew on that together for a minute or two. Do you know any Christians who think or act like being the church means being apart from the world? You might even know some who are afraid of the world or think it's evil. What would you like to tell them?

Sometimes, of course, being *for* the world means being *against* the world, just like when your kids are doing something that is dangerous or wrong, being *for* them means challenging and maybe even working to change them. But being the church is never about leaving the world. God loves the world! Through us, God is at work making it holy and whole. In fact, making the world holy and whole is the point of being the church. And if we're not doing *that* then we're not the church at all.

No experience necessary

Jesus didn't come to start a church. He came to show God's love for the whole world. He came to heal and to teach and to save. And, as he did that, he gathered a crowd. Some of those who assembled realized that he wasn't kidding when he said the kingdom of God had come near. They were changed by that encounter. And when Jesus said, “Hey, you want to come along and help?” they followed him. They were the church. Long before there were church buildings or seminaries to train pastors or even a book with the story of Jesus written down in it, *they were the church.*

The church is people.

And, today, the church is us.

We are the church when we get together to celebrate and to mourn, to worship and to learn and to serve. But we are also the church when we are at home, at work, at school, having coffee with the neighbor, doing our shopping, paying our taxes, marking the ballot. We are the church wherever we go. It is our job, in all those places, to share the good news of God's love in everything we say and everything we do.

> GET TO WORK!

How are you doing so far? In one way, there is nothing earth-shattering about any of these ideas: The church is in, with, and for the world—participating in God's loving mission to make all things new—or it isn't the church. The church is people. We are the church whenever we gather and wherever we go. Etc., etc., etc.

I mean, how can you argue with any of that? On the other hand, this is a totally radical way of thinking about what it means to be the church. If we actually functioned that way, most of our congregations would look totally different. Our lives would look different. Want to talk about this awhile? Go ahead. Talk.

Are you back? Okay. I'm guessing one of the things that came up in your conversation is how utterly unprepared a lot of people—including, maybe, you—feel to *be* this kind of church.

Well, don't.

There is no experience necessary to be the church. The first people who answered Jesus' call to follow him certainly didn't have any. And this is no big secret, either. In fact, at least one early church leader made a point of reminding everybody that following Jesus does not require any special talent or any sort of super faith or any some kind of remarkable ability:

"Consider your own call, brothers and sisters," the apostle Paul told his Christian friends in a town called Corinth. "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Corinthians 1:26).

> GET TO WORK!

The Corinthians had been fighting among themselves about who the best Christians were. Paul heard about this and sent them this letter. But, seriously, can you imagine yourself getting this letter from Paul . . . tearing it open all excited to hear from your friend . . . and hearing this?! Would you have been angry—or thankful—to be told the truth? Who in your life tells you the truth now? Who can you count on to say the hard things you need to hear?

Read Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:26 again. What truth do you hear for you in them?

Paul was being a little harsh, maybe. But he wasn't trying to be cruel. He just wanted his friends to remember that, when it comes to stuff like saving the world, it's all God. It's *all* God.

"God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise," he said. "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and

despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:27–29). In fact, if you're going to boast, Paul says, "boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:31).

The first evangelists

Sometimes Christians do give the impression that we have it all together. Sometimes we even have rules—written and unwritten—that make it clear that people who don't have it all together (and that gets defined in many ways) aren't welcome. But there is no experience necessary to be a follower of Jesus or to participate in God's loving mission to save the world.

In fact, the very first followers of Jesus were the most unlikely bunch of people *ever*. Let's meet some of them.

> GET TO WORK!

Spend some time getting to know one or two of Jesus' first followers. Chose from the man who had a "legion" of demons (Mark 5:1–20), the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–39), and the Seventy whose names we don't even know (Luke 10:1–12, 17–20). You may not be able to spend time with more than one of these people in this session. If you do, take their stories one at a time. Read the story out loud. After each story, spend time talking about these three questions:

- 1. What is this story about?*
- 2. What do you hear God saying to you in this story?*
- 3. What do you hear God saying to us, as a group or as a congregation or the whole church, together?*

Take as much time as you need doing this. It is the most important part of this whole session.

If you took the stories of these people—the Gerasene

demoniac, the Samaritan woman, and the Seventy whose names we do not know—and added them to the stories of all the other people who first followed Jesus, you would get a very interesting picture of what God thinks it takes to be an evangelist (or a missionary or a minister or a disciple or whatever fancy word you want to put in here to describe you and your call to be a part of what God is up to in the world). It takes:

- Having an encounter with Jesus during which he does something to you: heals you or forgives you or challenges you or questions you or calls you or sends you or whatever, and

- Doing or saying something to somebody else about it.

Yep. It's as simple as that. 🌸

Kelly Fryer, who holds master of divinity and master of theology degrees, is author of the best-selling *Reclaiming the L Word: Renewing the Church from Its Lutheran Core* and writer for the *No Experience Necessary* Bible study series (both from Augsburg Fortress). She is executive director of A.R.E.: A Renewal Enterprise, a company that provides organizational consulting and leadership coaching.

As a community of women created in the image of God, called to
discipleship in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit,
we commit ourselves to grow in faith, affirm our gifts, support one another
in our callings, engage in ministry and action, and promote healing
and wholeness in the church, the society, and the world.

—The Augsburg Fortress *Book of Worship*, 1993

Help for Leaders by Kelly Fryer

Overall theme

In this Bible study, we will explore how women can boldly take part in God's mission to love and bless and save the world. To be the church is to participate in that mission by sharing the Good News about Jesus Christ in word and deed.

Directions for use

This Bible study is designed to be used by individuals or in a small group. If you are in a small group, you probably have a group leader or facilitator. If you *are* the leader, please notice that there are "Get To Work!" sections here and there throughout each session, suggesting discussion questions for you and your group members to wrestle with and Bible exercises for you to do. Your job, as leader for this Bible study, is to help create a healthy and creative space for discussion, and to encourage your group to spend time really reading and talking about the Bible together.

How can you create a healthy, creative space?

First of all, remember that, when it comes to Bible study, no experience is necessary! And everybody is, in some way, an expert. That's why there's no "special" information for Bible study leaders here. It isn't your job to know more than anybody else. (Now's a good time to breathe a big sigh of relief!) In fact, you can be most helpful if you simply encourage each member of your group, no matter how little or how much Bible study experience they've had, to add her input and share her reflections.

Some members of your group will know a lot about the history of the Bible. Some members will have the ability to help your group think theologically about what you're reading. Some members will have a special gift for hearing the Spirit speak new and challenging

words. Some members will be able to make important connections between the Bible story and current events. Everyone will have something! Your responsibility is to draw out the best in everybody. Make sure no one is allowed to dominate the conversation. Encourage group members to respect each other's opinions and help them learn to listen for God's voice speaking through one another. Keep reminding them that there is no single "right" answer to the questions, "What does this mean?" and "What do you hear?" and "What do you think God is trying to say to us?"

Here is a good outline for approaching each session in this Bible study:

- If you're a new group or there are new members in your group, spend time at the beginning of each session getting to know one another. If you're old friends, check in with each other at the start of each session. Talk about how life is going and what has been happening since the last time you were together.
- Pray together. Ask somebody different each time, ahead of time, if she would be willing to pray on behalf of the group. Encourage her to talk to God naturally, just as though God is in the room, and ask God for open minds and open hearts. Remind her that God is in the room and will guide the group's prayers.
- Read the study together, stopping to do the exercises and reflect on the discussion prompts.
- Pray together again. End with everyone praying out loud, in turn. If this is a new experience for your group, be gentle with each other and patient with yourselves!

God has something to say to each of us and to all of us, together, through the biblical story. God is speaking to us today through these ancient words. As we read the Bible—and listen to each other talk about what we hear God saying—we will learn to recognize God's living voice so that we can act boldly for *mission*!



BIBLE STUDY

ACT BOLDLY FOR MISSION
SESSION 3

In the Power of the Holy Spirit

by Kelly Fryer

FIND LEADER GUIDE
ON PAGE 37.

The message we have to share as missionary and evangelical people is God's message. God sends the Holy Spirit to be at work in and through us, so that we can do it! We'll look at a few stories from the Book of Acts to learn what happens to and through people when the Holy Spirit is on the loose.

Introduction

Having grown up in the shadow of the steel mills in northwest Indiana, I didn't know what to expect when I received my first call as pastor of a rural congregation in northern Illinois. My only experience with "the country" was driving through it on the expressway, on my way from one place to another. And, frankly, that experience was boring.

I know this probably sounds ridiculous to many of you but I can't even tell you how surprised I was by how much *happens* in the country that no one ever sees whizzing by on the interstate. Just for starters, okay, there is so much *color* out there. I spent my whole first year utterly captivated while the fields taught me, first, what *green* looks like, pulsating with new life in the shape of fragile and determined crops sprouting up from that rich black soil.

Then I learned just how many vibrant shades of gold there are under the sun, as the harvest spun out in the fall. And nothing is more blindingly beautiful than the untouched white snow that blankets the earth in winter.

I'm not sure exactly what I expected to find when I got to that little piece

of God's beautiful earth, far from anything I'd ever known or experienced before. But what I found was life. And wherever there is life, there is change.

In other words, it was anything but boring.

A love-hate thing

None of us would really want to stop things from changing even if we could, because we know that if you're not changing you're dead. Change is a necessary and unavoidable part of life. But that doesn't mean we like it.

It's impossible to know for sure, but if I had to guess, I'd say that the earliest Christians probably weren't wild about it, either.

We get little hints of this in the stories we read about them in the Bible. For example, you may know how the story about Peter goes: He was one of Jesus' very first followers. He was there when Jesus pulled off the most unbelievable stunts, like feeding eight or ten thousand people at a crack—men, women, and children—with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. He was there when the rumors about Jesus started to fly and the crowds began following him around the countryside, eager to grab hold of whatever bits of wisdom and truth Jesus threw their way. He was there when Jesus healed the hopeless and battled the demonic and confounded the uptight religious rulers of his day with his teachings about God.

Peter knew his Lord was destined for greatness and that he would, in fac-

do great things for his people. Then, one day out of the blue, Jesus started talking about a plan Peter hadn't heard before. What's worse, Jesus revealed this plan to the mob that had been tagging along behind them before he even had a chance to talk it over with his disciples. He told them straight out that "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31).

Peter was horrified.

"Jesus, stop," Peter hissed.

Jesus paused mid-sentence and looked at his friend, a question mark in both their eyes.

"Come here," Peter said in a loud whisper, trying not to make a scene in front of the crowd. "I need to talk to you."

When he had Jesus alone, Peter let him have it. We don't know exactly what he said to Jesus but it was sharp enough to tick Jesus off.

"Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus said to his disciple. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then he turned back to the crowd and pretended like Peter wasn't even there:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," he said, even more fervently than before.

Peter may have been thinking, "But ... but ... but ..."

It wasn't the last time Jesus changed things up on his followers. In fact, you could say that life with Jesus was one change after another.

> GET TO WORK!

Turn to the story about how the church got its start. Stop and read Acts 1:1–11 right now.

What kinds of changes happen to Jesus' followers in this story? How do they respond? Some parts of this story seem utterly fantastical—like Jesus suddenly ascending into heaven and

angels appearing. What parts of this story seem the most believable . . . the most real . . . the most true to life? Why? What else do you notice about this story?

Remember, after Jesus was put to death, his followers never expected to see him again. When he appeared to them on that first Easter, they couldn't have been happier. Then after a few weeks, suddenly, he was gone again.

First, he left them with an enormous job: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Then, as if this change in plans wasn't enough, Jesus virtually promises them that their whole lives will be marked by change. He tells them that he is going to send the Holy Spirit to them.

And, friends, *nobody* does change like the Holy Spirit.

> GET TO WORK!

Some people love being a part of the church because they feel like it's one of the few places that doesn't change. Or they think, at least change happens very slowly here. In fact, many people in the church actively resist change, thinking that it's their job to maintain tradition and make sure things happen the way we've always done it before. Do you know anyone like that? Does that describe you in any way? What are you thinking about this idea that change is both an inevitable part of life and a fundamental characteristic of life in the church? Is this conversation getting you pumped up with excitement or giving you sweaty palms? Discuss.

Anything but boring

The members of that earliest church quickly discovered that their lives would be anything but boring.

They went back to Jerusalem, like Jesus told them to do before he took off for the heavenly realm, and they waited. Even with a warning, though, that something big was coming, they couldn't have been prepared for what happened next:

"Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages . . ." (Acts 2:2-4).

Trying to make sense of it all, Peter remembers a snippet of Scripture, something from the book of the prophet Joel.

"Hey everybody, listen!" Peter said. "We should have known something like this would happen. Remember your Bible stories? Remember how the prophet Joel said that one day God would pour out the Spirit and that, when it happened, everything would be different? Remember how he said old people would dream new dreams and young people would see visions? That's happening to us right *now*!"

> GET TO WORK!

This wasn't the last time Jesus' followers would understand their Bible in a whole new way because the Holy Spirit got into the mix. Check out Acts 4:10-11, where they quote another Old Testament passage (Psalm 118) in order to explain how Jesus—who had been rejected—could be the Messiah. Now read Acts 4:23-31. They are quoting the Old Testament again—this time from Psalm 2, which they believed was written by King David—in order to try and make sense of what's happening to them. What is happening that sends them back to their Bibles? Can you tell by reading this passage? What situation are they responding to in their own lives? What is their context? And how does this ancient bibli-

cal passage they're quoting—a passage that was from King David and about King David—help them understand it?

When the prophet Joel wrote those words about the Spirit, he could never have foreseen what was happening in the streets of Jerusalem that Pentecost day. Neither could King David have imagined that, one day, his words would be re-interpreted by a bunch of Christians gearing up to spread the Good News of Jesus in a hostile world. When David wrote the words to that song, he was complaining about people who had been hostile to him and to his rule. Neither he or Joel were writing about Jesus' followers. They were writing long, long, long before Jesus was even born. But, with the help of the Holy Spirit, Peter and the other Christians were able to understand these ancient biblical words in a whole new way. Yes, with the help of the Spirit, even the meaning of the Bible itself seemed to change for those early Christians as they were confronted by a strange new context.

> GET TO WORK!

Have you ever thought about the way our understanding of Scripture has changed over time? If not, think about it now. What examples can you give? If you're having trouble thinking of something, consider the role of women in leadership within the church. For centuries, Christians understood the Bible to say that women couldn't be in leadership. Today, some Christians still think this but many, many disagree. We believe the Bible not only allows women to be in leadership but that, in fact, there were women leaders in Biblical times. How do you explain the way in which our understanding of the Bible changes so much over time? How has your understanding of the Bible changed? What new insights or questions have you had

lately? What ideas are being challenged? How are you—and your understanding of the Bible—being changed?

Shaped for mission

The Holy Spirit had a way of turning everything upside down for the members of that earliest church. It might have started with their understanding of Scripture, but it didn't end there. The Holy Spirit was at work in and through the lives of those first Christians, changing them—and shaping them—for the sake of God's mission to love and bless and save the whole world.

Throughout the story, the Holy Spirit is at work making the church bold (Acts 4:31) . . . giving them wisdom (Acts 6:3, 10) . . . helping them endure persecution (Acts 8:55) . . . moving them outside of their comfort zone and into the company of strangers (Acts 8:29) . . . raising up new and unexpected leaders (Acts 13:2) . . . steering them into new directions (Acts 13:4) . . . filling them with joy (Acts 13:52) . . . challenging them when they tried to go their own way instead of waiting for God's direction (Acts 16:6–7) . . . and ordering their life together (Acts 20:28).

It's ironic that the story of the earliest church is called "The Acts of the Apostles" when you can see very clearly that it's actually all about "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit was on the loose in the life of that early church.

> GET TO WORK!

Would you say the Holy Spirit is on the loose in your life? How about in the life of your congregation? What evidence would you submit to support your answer?

How is the Spirit changing you—and shaping you for mission? How do you see the Spirit at work in and through your congregation? Look again at the list of things the Spirit did in the

lives of those early Christians (two paragraphs above). How many of those things is the Spirit doing in your life today and in the life of your congregation?

How open are you to the work of the Spirit, anyway? Do people in your congregation talk much about the Spirit? Do you think there is openness to the kinds of changes the Spirit brings? Or do you think you all need to be more open to the Spirit? If so, what would that look like? How do you get the Spirit, anyway? If you want to see how the first Christians did it, turn to Acts 2 again. What do you see there? What did they do? What can we learn from this today?

A surprise ending

Probably when we first started talking about being evangelical people and participating in God's mission to love and bless the world, you thought this was all about *us* changing *them*. A lot of Christians, in fact, believe that our job is to *take* Jesus to people so that Jesus can fix 'em. You hear these Christians talk about how we have to *save the lost*. And stuff like that.

Well, to be sure, when people hear the good news about Jesus, it changes them. God loves the world and every single person in it. God wants everyone to receive the gift of love and reconciliation and salvation.

But as we participate in God's mission, *the world* isn't the only thing that is changed. We are, too.

> GET TO WORK!

Spend some time reflecting together on one of the central stories in the life of that early church, the story of Peter's encounter with the Gentile named Cornelius. Turn to Acts 10: 30–48. Read the story out loud. Remember that, up until now, only Jews had become Christians.

Then Peter gets in hot water for what he did and has to explain himself to the church leaders in Jerusalem.

After you read the story, spend time talking about these three questions:

- 1. What is this story about?**
- 2. What do you hear God saying to you in this story?**
- 3. What do you hear God saying to us, as a group or as a congregation or the whole church, together?**

Take as much time as you need doing this. It is the most important part of this whole session.

Peter discovered the truth that God really is on the loose *out there*. We don't have to take Jesus to people. Jesus has already gone before us into every place

that we are sent. The Holy Spirit is already present and doing stuff in and through the people we work with, go to school with, play with, and live with. Our job, as evangelical people, is to be on the lookout for what God is doing . . . and jump in. And when the Holy Spirit nudges us, our job is to tell people what we see. As we do this, the world will most certainly be changed.

And so will we. 🌿

Kelly Fryer, who holds master of divinity and master of theology degrees, is author of the best-selling *Reclaiming the L Word: Renewing the Church from Its Lutheran Core* and writer for the *No Experience Necessary* Bible study series (both from Augsburg Fortress). She is executive director of A.R.E.: A Renewal Enterprise, a company that provides organizational consulting and leadership coaching.

continued from *Blessings Leak*, page 31

We hope Mina is recovering quickly.

So often we hear only from readers who are upset about something—they think the Bible study is too hard, or too easy, or they disagree with one of our writers. So we get a little discouraged sometimes (especially when we're struggling to meet all our deadlines). Your e-mail really brightened our day. This is a very busy time: We are preparing the Leader Guide and Companion Bible for the next study, as well as working on the magazine. So we're a little tired.

The next Bible study is on the Beatitudes and the first session talks about how we are blessed and how we bless others and how blessings leak . . . they splash and drip and get all over everything.

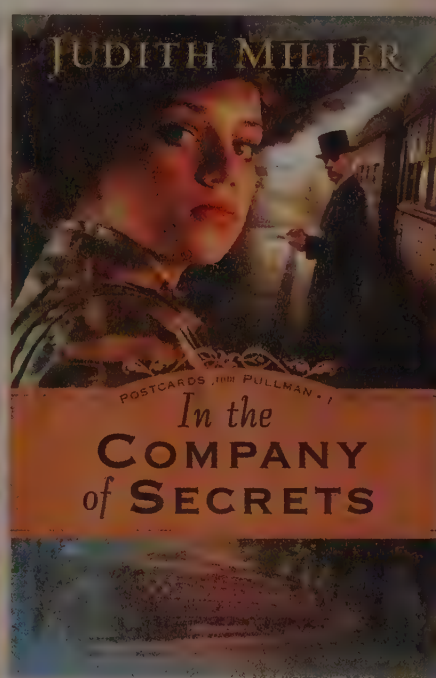
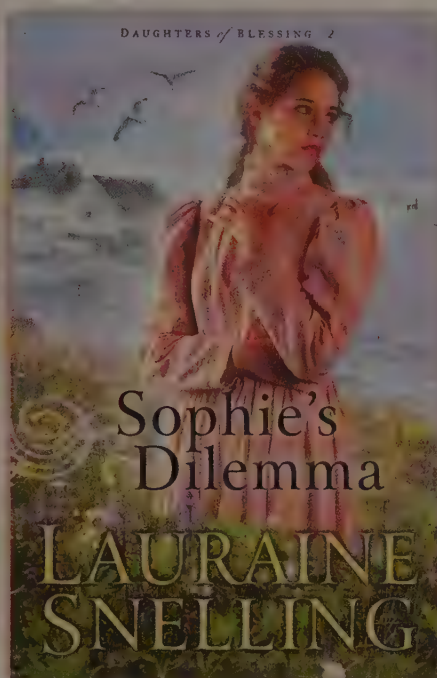
Your Bible study that night was that kind of blessing. Kate Elliott, editor, *LWT*

That, friends, is how blessings leak. Barbara blessed her group by leading the Bible study session and was blessed in return. Mina remembered the blessing of that lesson in her hour of crisis, and was comforted. The e-mail Barbara sent blessed us on the *LWT* staff, and now the blessings leak and splash onto you, our readers. In God's economy nothing is wasted.

Learn more about our upcoming Bible study "Blessed to Follow: The Beatitudes as a Compass for Discipleship" by Martha E. Stortz. You can read her reflections on page 44.

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Blessed to Follow: The Beatitudes as a Compass for Discipleship

by Martha E. Stortz

“Come and get it!” The call rang out across the court every evening at six o’clock sharp with such regularity, we could set our clocks by it. From swingsets and soccer games, the Cadigan children came scrambling. “Be here or it’ll be gone!” For a family of six children, that was less a threat than a statement of fact. “Dinner’s on the table!”

I grew up in one of Baltimore’s famous brick row houses, every one of them teeming with kids. Our neighbors, the Cadigans, had more than most, and Mrs. Cadigan shepherded them with a lot of love and a loud voice. She barked orders like a drill sergeant. When provoked, her language was colorful and her threats ever more creative. The kids

always showed up—they wanted to hear what she’d come up with next.

Jesus has a different way of getting people to the table. He does not resort to command or threat. He simply blesses. The first word out of his mouth as he inaugurates his public ministry in Matthew’s Gospel is the word “blessed.” And if disciples don’t get it the first time

repeats the word—not once, but many times.

Blessings roll down upon the crowd like water in a desert. As they soak them in, the kingdom of God comes in their midst.

Called by blessing: Think about it for a moment. We are used to being called by command: “Go and do this!” Or “Go and be this!” Have you heard the story of the man who looked up from his plow and saw the clouds forming the letters “P.C.” in the sky above him? Thinking he was supposed to “Preach Christ,” he promptly signed up for seminary. After a few years of frustration, he realized the letters probably meant “Plow Corn” and went back to the farm. When we think of call, we usually think of command. Jesus, however, calls by blessing.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GOD

In a world according to God, blessings rule. Once our ears are turned to the frequency of blessing, we hear them everywhere. Like a song you can’t get out of your head, we find blessings throughout the Bible. Trained to see them in Scripture, we begin to trace the path of blessing in our own lives. Here’s what we find:

- God calls us by blessing.
- We call God by blessing.
- Blessings leak—they manage to get all over everything.

God calls us by blessing. Certainly command is not foreign to the vocabulary of God. “Thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” direct disciples in a certain way of life, and there’s no doubt about that. Blessing, however, commissions disciples, calling us into the path to begin with.

Hear it in Elizabeth’s greeting to her kinswoman Mary, both of them pregnant, both about to embark upon a journey whose destination no one then knew: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Luke 1:42). These words of blessing call Mary to a new vocation. She is “mother of the Lord,” God-bearer, *theotokos* in the lyrical Greek of the ancient church.

Hear it again in the words of Jesus, as he calls out disciples: “Blessed are the poor in spirit... blessed are those who mourn... blessed are the meek...” (Matthew 5:3-5).

We are called by blessing. We call God by blessing. Blessing is a way of getting God’s attention, and the psalmist seems to have known this better than anyone. Blessings abound in the psalms, especially in the psalms of blessing, but also in psalms of lament and penance. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name” (Psalm 103:1). Hard-wired to praise the One who

made us, we find blessing to be the heart’s first language.

Hear it in the ancient Hebrew prayers: “Blessed are you, O Lord God, King of the universe!”

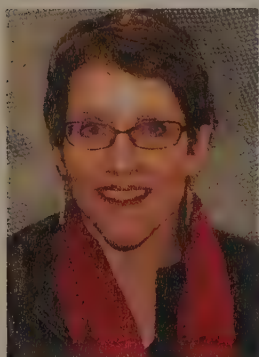
Hear it in the hopeful words of Zechariah, as his silence breaks: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them . . .” (Luke 1:68).

Blessings leak. Blessings are hard to contain. Like the syrup at a boisterous pancake breakfast, they manage to get all over everything: hands and feet, clothes and tablecloths, hair and chairs. Blessings are messy that way. Blessings leak onto everything they touch. That’s God’s way of reaching out to the whole of creation.

Hear the reach of divine blessing in the rest of Zechariah’s song. A stunned crowd wonders, “What then will this child become?” (Luke 1:66), and Zechariah tells them. “You, my child, will be called the prophet of the Most High . . .” (Luke 1:76). Zechariah began by blessing “the Lord God of Israel,” but within a few verses the blessings have bled out onto the infant John, who will “go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (Luke 1:76). The blessings won’t stop there: John will bless people with the news that the kingdom of God is at hand.

Finally, hear these blessings come full circle in Jesus’ ministry.

In his first sermon, he calls out disciples by blessing them. In his last sermon, the Great Judgment (Matthew 25:31–46), he shows the same disciples how they have blessed him: “Come, you that are *blessed* by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for *I* was hungry and you gave me food, *I* was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. . .” The ones who were blessed in the beginning of Jesus’ ministry have become the ones who bless.



THE UPCOMING BIBLE STUDY

Blessings leak, and as we receive the blessings of Jesus’ Beatitudes, we become a blessing to others. The arc of Christian discipleship falls between Jesus’ first and last sermons. Like a rainbow stretching across a wonderful landscape, these blessings bear the wild promise of the world according to God. In this year’s Bible study, we listen with fresh ears to Jesus’ first sermons, tuning our ears to the frequency of blessing.

These are targeted blessings.

They are not scattered randomly, nor are they simply cast into the wind. Rather they are directed to people, more specifically to people in certain situations.

The first four Beatitudes target people in situations of suffering: those who are poor in spirit, deep in grief, meek, or persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

The second four Beatitudes target people who help those who suffer: those who show mercy, make peace, display purity of heart, and fight for justice.

To understand these targeted blessings, each session invites participants to identify places in their own lives where they have suffered or been a companion with those in suffering. We will find ourselves blessed.

These blessings bear stories. Each of these targeted blessings evokes a biblical story of one of our foremothers or forefathers in the faith: Hagar and Ishmael, Ruth the Moabite woman, Moses. Remembering these stories allows us to better understand the blessing.

These blessings point to Jesus.

In his first sermon, Jesus is the one blessing. By his last sermon, he shows that he is the one who is blessed. Each of the Beatitudes directs us to a specific part of Jesus’ story. As we remember his story, we learn more of what it means to follow him.

These blessings fall on disciples. They empower us, making us over into the kind of people Jesus calls us to be. Blessings empower us for a life of service. So blessed, we become a blessing to others. Each Beatitude suggests a facet of Christian discipleship: the long-tempered character of biblical meekness, the heart’s truest longing, the spiritual poverty we cultivate so that God might fill us.

Finally, blessings get concrete. Each Beatitude suggests a practice of discipleship: forgiveness, holy conversation, service, discernment. You are encouraged to come up with other practices, but the point is to root these blessings in the real world.

When I accepted the invitation to do this project a year ago, I had no idea what I was getting into. But the text showed me the way. Through these blessings, I stumbled into the stories of countless biblical authors and figures. I found the pain of the world in these stories; I also found the promise of God. I invite you to do the same. You will be richly blessed, as I was.

Be blessed to be a blessing. 🌿

Martha E. Stortz is professor of historical theology and ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, Calif., and the author of *A World According to God* (Jossey-Bass, 2004)



WE RECOMMEND

Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

New program on the Holy Spirit

See the new program on the Holy Spirit from Mosaic Television, the video ministry of the ELCA. From creation to Pentecost to our world today, the third person of the Trinity blows into our lives like a divine wind, inspiring, prompting, and leading us to Jesus Christ.

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To order, call 800-638-3522 ext. 6009 or e-mail Mosaic@elca.org. You can also view the program on the Web at www.elca.org/mosaic/Holyspirit

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how these tools for better health and education offer gifts of new hope and dignity to thousands of people around the world each year. Running time 12 minutes; available in VHS or DVD. Call 1-800-LWR-LWR-2 to order a free copy.

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Some 200 years ago, British politician William Wilberforce and his friends took on the most powerful forces of their day to end the slave trade. His mentor was John Newton, the slave trader turned songwriter, who wrote the world's most well-known hymn, "Amazing Grace." This year is the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, but the work of justice and mercy isn't finished yet. More than 27 million men, women, and children are still enslaved around the globe. Find out more about Amazing Grace Change, a campaign to carry out the vision of mercy and justice. Go to www.theamazingchange.com/index.html to learn more.



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GRACE NOTES

Nothing Impossible

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



Two times in my life, I have had significant and even elaborate plans in place, plans for my future. Both times, I had thought, consulted, researched, prayed, and planned. I had accounted for nearly everything—or so I thought. Instead, God stepped in and life was changed. I was called to something new and different. The first time this happened, when I was in my teens, I was incredibly disappointed to have my plans changed, and I was dragged reluctantly into a different future. The second time this happened, when I had more than 20 years of experience behind me, I was able to be a bit more grace-filled. But it wasn't easy.

Now consider. How was it that Mary, so young, only a teen engaged to be married, could be so gracious, trusting, and willing when the angel Gabriel came to her and said she, a virgin, was to bear the child of God? Where did her poised acceptance come from? She showed surprise and disbelief at first. But there was no whining. Gabriel tells her that her cousin, whom everyone thought was barren, was six months' pregnant. "For nothing," says Gabriel, "will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

"Let it be with me according to your word," says Mary. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." And so a poor girl gives birth to the God who lives among us.

In some traditions, including our own, we remember Mary, the mother of our Lord, on August 15. The Annunciation is celebrated on March 25. Many of us associate the Magnificat—Mary's lyri-

cal and radical response to the announcement—with Advent. Whatever the day, it is important for Lutheran women to remember Mary, aspiring to her life-transforming faith.

Last March, when people the world over gathered in Lund, Sweden, to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Lutheran World Federation, we were privileged to hear Anders Wejryd, the Archbishop of Sweden, preach on the Annunciation. The archbishop reminded us that God often calls overlooked, unexpected, or even downtrodden people to be the ones who bring us a future of hope. God still calls the Marys among us.

"What now seems weak may become strong," Archbishop Wejryd reminded us. "What now seems self-evident and unquestioned may appear very different when we are given perspectives from below, from the point of Mary, from the points of view of forgotten and oppressed women and men and from the cross. Times and lives change. God is still there and God wants to reach us, to comfort, lead, and bless." For nothing will be impossible with God.

As you look forward to a new year of programming with Women of the ELCA, I pray that you have the life-transforming faith of Mary. I pray that when God calls you (and God will) your response is as gracious and trusting as that of Mary. Imagine where God might be taking our organization! For nothing will be impossible with God. 🌿

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.

The mission of Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is to mobilize women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ.



AMEN!

To Tell the Story

by Catherine Malotky

Who am I, God? Your

child, I know. That's clear to me when I attend church, when I spend time with my faith friends. But how do I know who I am as a faith-full person when I am surrounded by those who are not so filled with faith? Or those who are filled with a faith that may be quite different from my own?

It seems to me that this is really important today. We see the passion and pain of fighting about the "rightness" of faith. We can see it in the Middle East, between the Sunnis and Shiites, between the Israelis and Palestinians. We see it elsewhere, in Eastern Europe and Africa, and, frankly, it's alive and well in our own country, too.

I disagree with much of what passes for Christianity today, and I often want to say out loud to the television, "That's not what I believe. That's not the way I understand it!"

But God, I know it's not seemly to spar, much less malign or kill, over our interpretation of you and the faith we hold. What kind of witness would that be?

I know that you are far bigger than anything I can imagine. Your ways, when we get right down to it, are a mystery to me. I really can't know who is *in* and who isn't. I really can't know who has it *right* and who does not. Only you can know that, God.

So what is it you call me to when you ask me to share you with others? Clearly, being overly assertive, even coercive, about my witness is offensive at best and death-dealing at worst. I

don't think you call me to be at war with my neighbor—to be a judge of whether or not my neighbor has it right . . . even though I do this on a regular basis.

Maybe you are open to a variety of interpretations of who you are and what you are about. Are you open to my cousins in faith, those who worship in synagogues and mosques, who spring from the same traditions, the same forefather, Abraham? Are you even open to those who differ from my opinions about abortion or homosexuality or contemporary worship music or ecumenism or the war in Iraq or who has the right to lead this country or . . . ?

Maybe, God, your call to me is not to convert anyone and everyone who crosses my life's path. Maybe your call is simply to tell the story of my life with you, to give witness to the ways you have nourished me, redeemed me, called me to task, and forgiven me. That means I have to find my own words to tell the story of faith.

Teach me to hold my judgment. God. Open me to the stories of others, the richness of their witness, and the blessing inherent in the sharing. Give me courage and wisdom to tell my own story, cherishing it as mine, my story of your work and love alive in my life, without demand or expectation, but merely as my offering to the conversation of faith. Amen. 🌿

The Rev. Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been a editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

WOMEN OF THE ELCA

in The news



The city of Wittenberg and its inhabitants are used to visitors, but the visit of 82 Lutheran women and men on a Bold Women of the Reformation tour is news. A reporter from the *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung* spent an evening with us, interviewing participants and taking in the magnitude of our visit. The reporter had already spent time on Women of the ELCA Web site and the trip blog as well. The article does a great job of portraying the purpose of our visit. A translation of the title of the article is: "It's as if we have come home."

—Linda Post Bushkofsky

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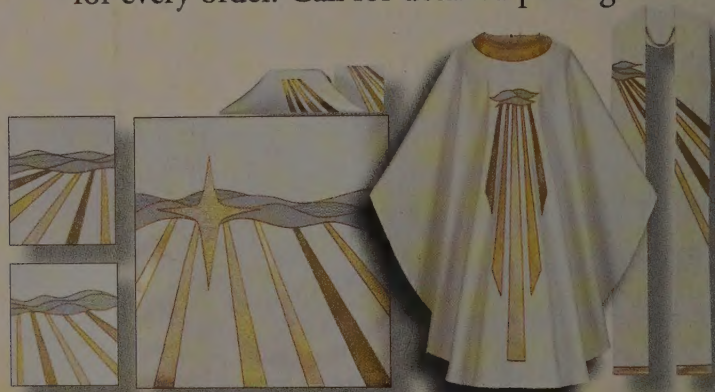
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